

NATIONAL HOME FOR DISABLED VOLUNTEER SOLDIERS,  
NORTHWESTERN BRANCH, WADSWORTH LIBRARY  
(Clement J. Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Building No. 3)  
5000 West National Avenue  
Milwaukee  
Milwaukee  
Wisconsin

HABS WI-360-D  
*WI-360-D*

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

### NATIONAL HOME FOR DISABLED VOLUNTEER SOLDIERS – NORTHWESTERN BRANCH, WADSWORTH LIBRARY

(Clement J. Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Building No. 3)  
HABS No. WI-360-D

Location: Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center, 5000 West National Avenue,  
Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin

Present Owner: U. S. Government

Present Occupant: Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center

Present Use: Library and storage

Significance: The Wadsworth Library was built in 1891-92 during a period of expansion for the Northwestern Branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. Originally the recreational facilities for resident veterans were housed in the multi-purpose Main Building, including a room designated as a library. Expansion of the membership and a shift away from the centralized model in the 1880s and 1890s resulted in the construction of a number of specialized new buildings, including the library. The library is attributed to prominent Milwaukee architect Henry C. Koch. Koch's firm was the architect for many buildings during this period of expansion including the hospital (1879), Ward Memorial Hall (1881), and chapel (1889). The library is still used for its original purpose and is an important part of the historic core of the Northwestern Branch campus.

## PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

### A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1891-92
2. Architect: attributed to Henry C. Koch
3. Original and subsequent owners, occupants, uses: The first floor and mezzanine are still used as a library. The basement is currently used for storage and work space; in the past this level housed billiards, a game room, and/or living quarters.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: N/A
5. Original plans and construction: N/A
6. Alterations and additions: The library has been changed very little. Small dormers were added to the north and south roof slopes circa 1909. A window opening on the south façade was enlarged into a fire escape door. A small lean-to shelter has been added at the basement level door on this façade. The bathrooms (including showers) added during use of the basement as living quarters are still extant on the north side of that level.

### B. Historical Context:

The National Asylum for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (renamed National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in 1873) was established by an Act of Congress signed by President Lincoln in March 1865. Federal officials recognized the growing need to care for Union soldiers injured during their Civil War service and subsequently unable to support themselves. This unprecedented federal effort paralleled many state and local initiatives to care for disabled soldiers as the wounded filtered back North after years of fighting. The initial legislation did not specify where the Asylums would be located, but the general understanding was that several sites in different parts of the northern states would be needed. The Eastern Branch was opened in Togus, Maine on November 10, 1866 to serve veterans in the Northeast. The first of the original branches, the Togus property was a former health resort that offered a number of buildings for immediate use. The Northwestern Branch in Milwaukee also was established in 1866, after negotiations with the Wisconsin Soldiers' Home Society transferred the money and property already acquired by that group to the federal effort. The Central Branch was located outside of Dayton, Ohio in 1867 to be accessible to a large number of veterans in the lower Midwest, western New York and Pennsylvania, and states to the south. By 1930 when the National Homes were incorporated into the new Veterans Administration, the system had grown to include veterans of multiple conflicts cared for at eleven campuses located around the country.<sup>1</sup> Many of

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Julin. "Northwestern Branch, National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers," Milwaukee County, Wisconsin. National Historic Landmark Registration Form (draft), (2008), 35. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Washington, D.C.

the historic National Home sites are still part of the vast system of hospitals and other veterans' benefits managed by the Department of Veterans Affairs (the Veterans Administration was converted into a cabinet-level department in 1989).

The Board of Managers embarked on ambitious building campaigns for the Northwestern and Central Branches that erected large-scale institutional structures within carefully designed landscapes. Historian Patrick Kelly draws convincing connections between this embrace of high profile institution building and the political motivations of veteran services. In his assessment the Board of Managers were "highly partisan politicians, advocates of a strong and active central state, and eager, for humanitarian as well as political reasons, to demonstrate the power of the federal government to create a centralized institution for the care of war-disabled veterans."<sup>2</sup> Linking care for disabled veterans to domestic ideals of home was an important rhetorical device to gain public support for this endeavor. These efforts culminated in successful lobbying to have the name changed to National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers in 1873 (hereafter NHDVS). The Board of Managers was especially careful to disassociate their institution from others with highly negative connotations, such as poorhouses or insane asylums.<sup>3</sup>

Each Soldiers' Home branch had some sort of library and reading was a popular activity. Patrick Kelly notes that "with the reading material available in branch libraries, a man could escape from the collective nature of institutional life and lose himself in individual reverie."<sup>4</sup> The first library for the Northwestern Branch was most similar to a private library in an upper class dwelling in that it was a room within a larger, multipurpose structure. During construction of the Main Building (HABS No. WI-360-A), the Board of Managers adopted a resolution that a number of amenities be housed in the building, including a reading room and library.<sup>5</sup> Descriptions published at the time of its dedication in September 1869 list rooms located on the first floor such as reception rooms and offices flanking the center corridor, dispensary, hospital, matron's room, parlors, library, surgeon's rooms and a sitting room for the inmates.<sup>6</sup>

Providing a library was a key component of the attempt to create a "homelike" atmosphere in a large institutional building. A survey of the members on November 30, 1875 revealed a literacy rate of seventy-four percent. In 1875 the Central Branch library subscribed to 35 daily newspapers, 251 weeklies, and 25 magazines, including publications from England, France, and Germany. Novels, newspapers, and periodicals were all in demand, as were non-fiction history books. Books could be checked out and taken back to the veteran's living quarters for up to two weeks.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick Kelly, *Creating a National Home: Building the Veterans' Welfare State, 1860-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 85.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly, 91.

<sup>4</sup> Kelly, 164.

<sup>5</sup> Minutes, 11 December 1868, *Proceedings of the Board of Managers NHDVS, Vol. 1*, (Washington, DC: GPO), 30. Wolcott was the only no vote on this resolution.

<sup>6</sup> "The Dedication Yesterday," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 28 September 1869, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly, 164.

In 1879, a few years after adding the end towers and making other improvements to the Northwestern Branch Main Building, the Board of Managers allocated \$2,375.38 for improvements to its library.<sup>8</sup> A glowing description of the new fixtures and finishes indicates its important status at the Northwestern Branch:

During the year a marble floor has been laid in the library and reading room, the ceilings have been tastefully adorned, and the walls hung with fine historic engravings. The rooms have also been fitted up with elegant black walnut book-cases, tables, chairs, and other furniture, making altogether very attractive apartments, of which the veterans are justly proud.<sup>9</sup>

It would appear that the Main Building library was the most lavishly appointed and elegant space at the Home at this time. A photograph published in an 1889 souvenir booklet offers an excellent view of the branch library in use (Figure 1). Men stand and sit around the room, many perusing newspapers while sitting in wood chairs. A long table holds additional newspapers and periodicals. Tall bookcases with glass doors line the inner walls and are filled with books; very similar, if not the same, bookcases are still extant in the current library. The marble floor, an attractive black and white checkerboard pattern, is visible, as are the historic engravings on the walls. Simple electrical pendant light fixtures hang from the ceiling. The ceilings are ornamented with a wide cornice and perhaps some other decorative painting.<sup>10</sup>

By the late 1870s, the Northwestern Branch began to shift to a decentralized arrangement like the Central Branch in Ohio. When testifying before a Congressional committee in 1884, General Sharpe, the current governor of the Northwestern Branch, expressed dissatisfaction with the large main building. He attributed most of the discipline problems to “herding” the men together in one large structure. The governor speculated that if he had enough money, he would prefer to tear the building down and start over on a decentralized barracks plan like the Central Branch.<sup>11</sup> In 1879 a new hospital was built west of the Main Building. This structure was the first major step toward creating the cluster of buildings that define the historic core of the campus and was indicative of the shift in focus to medical care of aging veterans.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than slowing as originally expected, the demand for the National Homes continued to grow as the Civil War veterans aged and Congress broadened admission requirements. In 1884 there was a major expansion of the eligibility requirements for the NHDVS branches. Previously proof had to be provided that one’s disability was a direct result of military service. Now any honorably discharged Union veteran was eligible for admission, as well as veterans of the War of 1812 and the Mexican War. As previously self-sufficient veterans

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<sup>8</sup> Board of Managers – NHDVS, *Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1879), 68.

<sup>9</sup> Board of Managers – NHDVS, *Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1880), 104.

<sup>10</sup> “Reading Room,” in *National Soldiers’ Home near Milwaukee*, (New York: The Albertype Co., 1889) in historical collection of the Medical Library, Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Kelly, 114.

<sup>12</sup> Board of Managers – NHDVS, *Annual Report*, (1880), 111.

became disabled due to various causes, including the long term effects of their military service or simply old age, the demand for Soldiers' Home admission grew rapidly.<sup>13</sup>

Henry C. Koch, Architect

Starting with the new hospital, the firm of Milwaukee architect Henry C. Koch (1841-1910) was repeatedly hired to design the new buildings at the Northwestern Branch. In 1881 Koch designed Ward Memorial Hall, which greatly expanded the recreational facilities for the branch by adding an auditorium and restaurant space. Ward Memorial Hall also housed the home store and a train ticket office. Koch and Co. designed an addition for the Main Building service wing and a new chapel for the branch in 1889. In September 1891 the Board of Managers passed a motion to allocate \$10,000 from the post fund for construction of a new library.<sup>14</sup> The post fund held monies collected from fines and fundraisers and was typically expended for recreational activities and equipment at the branch. At the same meeting, a motion was approved to build a new headquarters building and boiler house. Although there is no direct information regarding Koch's role in designing the new library, it is logical to attribute the library's design to his firm given their frequent activity at the site in this period.<sup>15</sup>

Born in Hanover, Germany in 1841, Koch came to the United States as an infant. His German background linked him to the large population of German businessmen and entrepreneurs who were coming to power in Milwaukee during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. He was educated in Milwaukee schools and learned architecture through an apprenticeship with George W. Mygatt beginning in 1856. Mygatt was Milwaukee's most important early architect, having started his practice in the 1840s. He designed numerous churches, stores, hotels, and residences as well as performing the duties of contractor and real estate investor. This range of projects and roles was an excellent learning experience for the young Koch. Along with Edward Townsend Mix, architect for the Main Building at the Northwestern Branch, Henry C. Koch was one of Milwaukee's most noted and prolific architects.<sup>16</sup> In May 1886, Koch wrote to *Inland Architect* that although there were approximately eighteen practicing architects in Milwaukee "Messrs. E.T. Mix & Co., and

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<sup>13</sup> Kelly 128; Judith Gladys Cetina, "A History of the Veterans' Homes in the United States, 1811-1930," (Ph.D. dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, 1977), 171, 167. Disabled veterans of the Mexican War and War of 1812 were first eligible in 1871, but there was some confusion regarding how to interpret the law requiring proof of service-related disability.

<sup>14</sup> Minutes, 9 September 1891, in Board of Managers – NHDVS, *Annual Report*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1891), 49.

<sup>15</sup> Koch's firm is known to have designed the headquarters building (Building No. 1) and the boiler house. According to the National Register nomination, the Wadsworth Library is similar to other Koch buildings, but "there is no documentation to support such an attribution." See Kristin Gilpatrick Halverson, et. al., "Northwestern Branch, National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers Historic District," Milwaukee County, Wisconsin. National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, (2005), 55-56. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Washington, D.C..

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Korom, *Milwaukee Architecture: A Guide to Notable Buildings* (Madison, WI: Prairie Oak Press, 1995), xi-xii. The most complete study of Koch's career is William P. O'Brien, *Milwaukee Architect: Henry C. Koch*. MA Thesis: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1989. Unless otherwise noted, information in the next three paragraphs comes from this work.

ourselves, have done fully three fifths of the entire amount of architecture work in the city.”<sup>17</sup>  
By the 1880s, Mix’s career was starting to wane and Koch was in his most productive period.

For the Soldiers’ Home commissions, Koch had the advantage of being a veteran himself. He enlisted in the Wisconsin infantry in August 1862 and served as a topographical engineer under General Phil Sheridan from October 1862 until the end of the war. Then he continued to serve as a civilian employee on Sheridan’s staff for the occupation of Louisiana. Upon return to Milwaukee in early 1866, Koch formed a partnership with Mygatt. In 1870 he established his own practice. Koch was also a charter member of Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) Post No. 1, which was named after early Soldiers’ Home advocate E. B. Wolcott. A biographical profile appearing in an 1890 GAR publication listed “the Soldier’s Home” first among his prominent public building designs in Milwaukee.<sup>18</sup>

Koch excelled at securing government commissions, successfully winning contracts for courthouses, schools, hospitals, orphanages, asylums, and government agencies throughout the Midwest.<sup>19</sup> Koch is best known locally for the German Renaissance Revival Milwaukee City Hall, built 1893-1895 and still in use.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the conspicuous German identity displayed in the design of City Hall, built at the zenith of German immigrant influence in Milwaukee politics, business and culture, the Soldiers’ Home structures designed by Koch and Co. exhibit a more subdued assortment of eclectic Victorian architectural modes.

Koch’s work also exhibits a typical Victorian tendency to embrace new materials and building technology. In his thesis, William O’Brien wrote:

Koch is an important exemplar of his profession in a particular time and place. In his buildings, popular stylistic elements were synthesized and efficient plans and mechanical improvements adapted, yielding handsome and sturdy buildings satisfactory to a broad range of clients.<sup>21</sup>

The dignified Renaissance Revival form of the library was a stylistic departure from his previous buildings on the site. The choice of Neoclassical structure on a raised basement was consistent with progressive library design developing in this period. O’Brien points out the combination of stone wall and metal roof truss at Koch’s French Gothic-style Gesu Roman Catholic Church, built 1892.<sup>22</sup> Designed a year or so earlier than the church, the library also uses metal roof trusses and load-bearing masonry walls.

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<sup>17</sup> “Milwaukee, Wis.,” *Inland Architect and News Record* (May 1886): 71.

<sup>18</sup> “Henry C. Koch,” in *Soldiers’ and Citizens’ Album of Biographical Record*. (Chicago: Grand Army Publishing Company, 1890), 810-811.

<sup>19</sup> O’Brien, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Milwaukee City Hall was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2005. See Quinn Evans, Architects. “Milwaukee City Hall,” Milwaukee County, Wisconsin. National Historic Landmark Registration Form, 2004. U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Washington, D.C.

<sup>21</sup> O’Brien, 62.

<sup>22</sup> O’Brien, 20.

Prior to designing the library at the Northwestern Branch, Koch's most notable public buildings were the Science Hall at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (1875, burned and rebuilt 1885), a number of schools in Milwaukee and elsewhere, and an addition for the State Normal School in Oshkosh (1876). He designed a wide variety of building types in his career, but few libraries. The only other contemporary library designs attributed to Koch are unsuccessful competition entries for much larger structures. In 1893 he submitted a design to the Milwaukee Public Library and Museum competition. In 1895 he entered the competition for the Wisconsin State Historical Library in Madison. In 1902 his firm designed the Fort Dodge Public Library in Fort Dodge, Iowa and the Carnegie Library for Ottumwa, Iowa.<sup>23</sup>

### Library Construction and Context

The Northwestern Branch library was constructed in 1891-92. No records have been located that document the library's construction process or its contractor. The Board of Managers report for 1892 noted:

A library building was erected during the year, from the post fund, costing complete, with steam and gas fittings, \$11,636.34. The basement of the building is fitted up as a billiard room, in which there are four billiard and two bagatelle tables. The library is well-lighted and comfortable, accommodating 125 readers and is well patronized.<sup>24</sup>

An 1894 report by the Inspector General offered more detail regarding the form and use of the new library. Here the cost is listed as \$13,000, for a "two-story stone and brick structure, commodious and well lighted." At this time the library housed 6,437 volumes and subscribed to ninety newspapers and periodicals. The main floor was used as the reading room and the basement housed a billiard hall. This combination was intended to provide an alternative to reading, particularly for the reported fifteen percent of the members who could neither read nor write.<sup>25</sup>

A souvenir booklet for the Northwestern Branch proudly described the new library and the growth of the collection in the few years since its completion. The description provides revealing information about the use of the building:

The main floor is used for the reading room, and is supplied with comfortable easy chairs, tables, newspaper files, librarian's office and issuing room; while the "gallery" is used for book cases. The library is growing each year, and now contains 7,600 volumes of standard works of history, biography, poetry and fiction, together with all the regular editions of 185 leading magazines and newspapers from the principal cities of the U.S., printed in all languages. All the

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<sup>23</sup> O'Brien, 13-14, 130-31, 133.

<sup>24</sup> Board of Managers, NHDVS, *Annual Report*, (1892), 89.

<sup>25</sup> J.C. Breckinridge, *Report of the Inspector General on the Several Branches of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers from October 3 to December 23, 1894* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1894), 20.



members of the Home have free access to the reading room of the library, and can also draw books to take to their quarters if they choose. The first floor [basement] of this building is tastily fitted up for amusements. There are four new billiard tables, pool tables, card tables etc. The use of all these is free to members of the Home – those on extra duty having the preference from 5 to 8:30 o'clock pm.<sup>26</sup>

The booklet also noted that the library “is modeled after the public library in Boston, and contains all the latest improvements regarding light, ventilation, etc.” It is interesting that the Boston Public Library is mentioned as the model here, even though the scale and program of the two structures are radically different. Boston Public Library, designed in 1888 by McKim, Mead, and White, was considered the key example of public library design in the late nineteenth century. Today scholars still view it as an important building in both the development of the library building type and the *oeuvre* of a major architectural firm. The choice of a Renaissance palazzo form and appropriate decoration is pointed to as an example of the shift to Neoclassical design by McKim, Mead, and White. The Northwestern Branch library does vaguely mimic the Renaissance Classicism of the Boston Public Library with a rusticated raised basement, pilasters, and a hipped roof.

During the nineteenth century most libraries in the United States were private or available only to subscribers. Starting in the late nineteenth century, many cities began to found “free library” systems to provide educational material and services to a wider array of citizens, particularly the burgeoning immigrant population. The Milwaukee Public Library was founded in 1875 but did not move into its purpose-built central library until 1898. The philanthropy of wealthy industrialist Andrew Carnegie would have a profound effect on both the development of professional library standards and the evolution of the building type, but his extensive library building efforts were just starting to gain momentum in this period.<sup>27</sup> Public libraries were still relatively rare outside of New England, so a free circulating library for the Soldiers' Home was a very progressive amenity.

Constructing a purpose-built library for the Northwestern Branch would have engaged the architects in the current debate about library management and form. The predominant type at this time was still a closed stack system, with librarians controlling access to books, rather than an open stack design that allowed patrons to browse and make their own selections. At the Northwestern Branch library, books were stored on the mezzanine level and only accessible to designated personnel via a winder stair at the northeast corner of the building. This library also illustrates the contemporary tension in library design between creating dignified, imposing Neoclassical structures and the older domestic model that included features such as reading nooks and fireplaces. The earlier model for library design was the Richardsonian Romanesque

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<sup>26</sup> Richard W. Corbett, *The Soldiers' Home – Detailed Description of the North-Western Branch of the National Military Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers* (7<sup>th</sup> edition). (Milwaukee: Burdick, Armitage & Allen Print, 1895), 3. The Zablocki VA Medical Center Library has a collection of souvenir booklets and postcards.

<sup>27</sup> George S. Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries: Their History and Impact on American Public Library Development*. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1969), 13-14. Carnegie started his library building initiative in 1886 in the Pittsburgh area, but the program did not expand to jurisdictions outside of his personal and business spheres until 1898.

libraries built in New England, such as Henry Hobson Richardson's Winn Memorial Public Library in Woburn, Massachusetts (1876-79). The Soldiers' Home library can be seen as a combination of the older, domestic-scale New England model and the newer preference for symmetrical, Neoclassical library structures. As described by architectural historian Abigail Van Slyck, the Richardsonian library had a double-height book hall that gave the space monumentality while the reading room was a cozier, domestic space that recalled the Victorian ideal of the home.<sup>28</sup> This model persisted even as librarians began complaining about its inefficiencies as early as the late 1870s. The Northwestern Branch library is essentially one large room that combines the monumentality of a high-ceilinged book hall with a light and airy reading room that provided a largely symbolic fireplace and more intimate spaces under the mezzanine.

A photograph published in an 1894 souvenir booklet provides an interior view of the new library as well as its use (Figure 2).<sup>29</sup> Similar to the view of the reading room in the Main Building, here veterans are shown sitting reading newspapers in high back wood chairs around the room, mainly near the columns supporting the mezzanine above. Four long tables with chairs are lined up at the center of the space. Tall bookcases with glass doors (moved from the library room in the Main Building) are visible on the mezzanine. Also visible are the metal trusses and a skylight. The fireplace at the end of the room and a picture rail around the outer walls provide domestic touches. As recalled by Elizabeth Corbett in her memoir of her childhood at the Northwestern Branch, the veterans enjoyed the spacious reading room, faithfully perusing the newspapers and periodicals or writing letters at the large tables with the pens and ink provided. Her account of happy hours spent at the library confirms the long-standing use of the first floor as a reading room and the mezzanine level for book shelving.<sup>30</sup>

### Later Changes and Use

In 1905 the name was changed to Wadsworth Library in honor of Major James Wolcott Wadsworth, President of the Board of Managers and a long-time Congressman from New York. The continued pressure to find dormitory space at the branch meant that the basement recreation area of this building was being used as living quarters. The Inspector General observed this arrangement and recommended it be discontinued in his 1913 report.<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Corbett mentions that the librarian, "Mr. Phelps," was also living at the library in this period.<sup>32</sup>

Around 1928, members of Congress began advocating for restructuring federal veterans services. Three different agencies served veterans – the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, the Pension Bureau, and the Veterans' Bureau (founded in 1921 and primarily involved

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<sup>28</sup> Abigail Van Slyck, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries & American Culture, 1890-1920*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 7-8.

<sup>29</sup> A. Witteman, *National Soldiers' Home near Milwaukee*. (New York: The Albertype Co., 1894). Zablocki VA Medical Center Library.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Frances Corbett, *Out at the Soldiers' Home: A Memory Book*. (New York: D. Appleton Century Company, 1941, reprinted in 2008 by Acta Publications and the West Side Soldiers Aid Society), 75-76.

<sup>31</sup> Inspector General, NHDVS, *Annual Report*, (1913), 30.

<sup>32</sup> Corbett, *Out at the Soldiers' Home*, 76.

with medical care and insurance). Various restructurings were considered; the most straightforward and ultimately successful proposal was combining all three agencies under a new Veterans' Administration. This proposal was approved by Congress on July 3, 1930 and instituted through an executive order. The NHDVS Board of Managers resisted the initial proposals, but finally their eleven branches were folded into the new VA. The NHDVS was no longer an autonomous agency; now their primarily domiciliary services were just one of many offered by the Veterans' Administration.<sup>33</sup>

During 1935 drawings were made of the library, as well as a number of other buildings at what was now known as the Wood, Wisconsin Veterans Administration facility. These drawings indicate that the shelter and fire escape on the south elevation were added after this time. The dormers are in place and the roof is sheathed with standing seam tin. A section indicates that the first floor and mezzanine had linoleum floors while the basement floor was maple. Photographs from 1949 show contemporary window treatments, furnishings, light fixtures, and linoleum flooring, but otherwise few changes to the interior. The skylight is not yet covered over. Apparently that same year the mother of a World War I veteran left funds in her will that were used to redecorate the library. These photographs are probably intended to show the finished project. Currently the upper floors are still used as a library for veterans and the basement is storage and workspace for the non-profit Soldiers' Home Foundation.<sup>34</sup>

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Renaissance Revival public building
2. Condition of fabric: Good

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The library is a one and a half story structure on a raised basement with a rectangular footprint. The shorter side is the main façade oriented to the street (41 feet, 1 inch, five bays wide). The side elevation is twice as long (79 feet, 6 ½ inches, ten bays wide).
2. Foundations: The library foundation is constructed of Rusticated Wisconsin limestone blocks. It is higher on the south and east sides where the ground slopes away from the building.
3. Walls: The library walls are built with "Cream City" yellow bricks laid in a common bond. Each bay is framed by brick pilasters with a simple stone capital and rusticated stone base. Spandrel panels above each window have three vertical rows of six rusticated stones slightly larger than the bricks. A belt course of smooth dressed limestone runs along the top of the pilasters.

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<sup>33</sup> Cetina, 382-383.

<sup>34</sup> Drawings, photographs, and notes regarding renovation are located in the historical collections of the Zablocki VA Medical Center Library. See also "Library at Wood Gets New Dress Under Will," *Milwaukee Journal*, 25 October 1949.

4. Structural system, framing: The library has load-bearing masonry walls. The roof framing system combines wood principal rafters and collar beams with thinner metal bottom chords, vertical members, and diagonal truss bracing. The cast iron members are riveted together and fastened to the wood beams with gusset plates. These metal trusses are bolted to large wood principle rafters. Interior supports for the mezzanine deck and in the basement level are round metal columns. The ones in the main library space have vaguely Corinthian capitals and may be hollow to accommodate air circulation. The basement level columns are more utilitarian in appearance. In the basement they support heavy wood floor beams.

5. Porches: The main entrance is accessed via an inset porch at the northwest corner of the structure. Visitors ascend six curved concrete steps to the entrance porch through rectangular openings at the north and west sides of the corner pier. Pipe railings were added sometime during the second quarter of the twentieth century and later replaced and reconfigured. The porch has a tongue and groove wood ceiling painted white. There is a square plastic ceiling light fixture (c. 1970s).

The basement level entrance on the west side of the south façade is sheltered by a small enclosed hipped roof structure. Here visitors must step down to access the basement doorway. The shelter has dentils on its cornice that correspond with those on the main section of the library. It was built sometime after 1935 since it does not appear on elevation drawings dating to that year.

6. Chimneys: There is an internal brick chimney with simple corbelled cap. The chimney sits parallel to the south, or rear, wall.

7. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance (north façade) has metal and glass commercial door with fixed side light (to the west side) and transom. This door is a modern replacement. The fire escape door at the first floor level on the south façade is a wood panel door with nine rectangular lights in the top half. It has a three light fixed transom above. This doorway was created from a window opening. The door is circa 1940 in appearance. The basement level doorway (south façade) has plain wood door finished in a high gloss varnish at the interior opening and a wood panel door with glazed upper half (three rectangular lights oriented horizontally) for the enclosed shelter. The exterior door on the shelter appears to date to circa 1940; the inner door at the basement is more recent.

b. Windows and shutters: The first floor library windows are wood sash in a thick wood frame set into the brick walls. Each tall opening has a smooth cut limestone sill and thicker limestone lintel. The window sash have three over three rectangular lights (oriented vertically) with thick muntins. These appear to be the original windows. Aluminum frame storm windows have been added. The basement windows are similar, but smaller, three over three wood sash set directly into the stone foundation. One exception is a two over two wood frame double casement located on the east façade, basement level, for emergency egress from the basement via a portable wood stair fire escape inside. Another exception is the smaller two light windows on the north elevation (the grade is higher here). There is a set of three small one over one wood sash

windows in the north dormer and two similar aluminum sash windows flanking the chimney in the south dormer.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The library roof is a hipped with a shallow pitch and covered with asphalt shingles. Drawings from 1935 indicate a standing seam tin roof that may have been original.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The library has a metal cornice with boxed eaves and dentils. There are enclosed gutters with galvanized metal downspouts along the walls.
- c. Dormers: Small front gable dormers were added at the center of the north and south roof slope in 1909.<sup>35</sup> The dormer roofs have gray asphalt shingles and the sides are sheathed with painted wood.
- d. Skylight: Although the clerestory openings are now covered, the skylight monitor is still extant. The monitor is a low gable roof section along the center of the hipped roof ridge.
- e. Vents: There are metal vent pipes located on each end of the ridge. Early photographs show these, or similar, pipes in the same location.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The basement has a variety of twentieth century partitions dividing the space into a long side hall from the entrance, several storage rooms, a large work room, and the remnants of full bathrooms. The first floor of the library is essentially one large reading room space, with an entrance foyer, librarian's office, work space, winder stair, and two small bathrooms on the north side of the room. A mezzanine extends around all four sides of the main reading room and houses book shelves.

2. Stairways: The only access between the mezzanine and first floor is an enclosed winder stair in the northeast corner. This wood stair is covered with linoleum. There is no direct access between the basement and upper floors.

3. Flooring: The flooring in the basement level is a mix of terrazzo (bathroom areas on north), recent vinyl tile in the large workroom, and concrete in the storage rooms at the south half of the plan. The first floor has recently installed commercial-grade carpeting. The mezzanine floor is covered with c. 1949 black and red linoleum squares. The same kind of linoleum is visible on the first floor in historic photographs.<sup>36</sup>

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The basement level has plaster walls and an acoustic tile ceiling. The first floor reading room has plaster walls with a wide wood chair rail and baseboard. The baseboard is approximately seven inches high with an ogee curve cap. The first floor walls are painted below the chair rail and wall papered above. The ceiling underneath the mezzanine is covered with acoustic tile and the exposed wood beams have chamfered corners. On the mezzanine level the plaster walls are painted aqua green. The ceiling here is plaster between the exposed structural beams. The ceiling and metal trusses are painted ivory. The skylight is still

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<sup>35</sup> These dormers are likely the "ventilators" referred to in a list of improvements for 1909. The cost was \$150. See Building No. 3 file in Zablocki VA Medical Center Library.

<sup>36</sup> See October 1949 interior view of library in Photographic File, Zablocki VA Medical Center Library.

in place although covered from the exterior and no longer transmitting natural light. It consists of six pairs of panels; each panel is unevenly divided into nine rectangular lights with thick muntins (the largest lights are in the center row).

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: There is a set of double doors between the foyer and the first floor reading room. Probably original, these doors have three raised panels on the bottom half and glazing in the top half with a beveled edge. The hardware appears to have been replaced in the mid-twentieth century. Other original doors at this level – the librarian office, bathroom - are wood with six raised rectangular panels (two horizontal and two pairs of vertical). The bathroom closet has a similar door with fixed wood louvers in the top half. There is a wide cased opening between the reading room and the librarian work space on the north end of the room. The typical doorway molding is wide beaded wood trim with bull's eye corner blocks. There are some older wood doors at the basement bathrooms with two recessed panels and more recent doors at the storage areas.

b. Windows: In the basement the windows have wide sills and are set directly into the masonry walls. The first floor windows have the same fluted trim with bull's eye corner blocks as the original doorways. There are additional typical windows on the interior walls on the librarian's office to provide views of the reading room and work space. The mezzanine dormer windows are surrounded by plain wood molding approximately six inches wide with a shallow sill.

6. Decorative features and trim: There are early-twentieth-century kitchen cabinet built-ins in basement north rooms. There is a fireplace at the south end of the main room with a carved wood mantel and a surround of tiles with gold high gloss glaze featuring a swirling foliage motif. The stylized motifs of the fireplace are typical of the library's 1891 construction date. The red clay mission tile hearth is a later replacement. The metal (probably) cast iron columns supporting the mezzanine have a faux marble painted finish that was recently done. There is a small cased pass-through opening between librarian office and staff space with plain trim and door, probably added during early twentieth century. Under the windows on the first floor and on the mezzanine level there is an assortment of book shelves from different periods; some shelves are built-in while others are free standing. Tall walnut bookshelves on the mezzanine are said to be the ones built for the library when housed in the main building.<sup>37</sup> The railing around the edge of the mezzanine is a wood balustrade painted a glossy black with square fluted balusters and a molded hand rail. Periodically the balusters are interrupted by a larger square post with a domed cap.

7. Hardware: Aside from some ventilation grilles in the basement, all of the hardware in the library seems to be utilitarian early twentieth century replacements.

8. Mechanical equipment:

a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation: There is a modern forced air HVAC system located in the basement. Ducts run along the basement ceilings and deliver heat via floor vents. Window

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<sup>37</sup> Corbett mentions this connection in her memoir, page 75.

unit air conditioners supplement the cooling system. A chain pull at either end of the mezzanine previously allowed one to open the vent pipes in the roof (now longer functional). A series of modern ceiling fans are mounted on the bottom truss members.

b. Lighting: Modern fluorescent tube ceiling lights are mounted on the ceilings in the mezzanine level and basement and at the bottom edge of the mezzanine for the first floor. The original lighting scheme for the main first floor reading room was sconces mounted on long curved rods and located around the outer edge of the mezzanine floor. Before it was covered, the skylight provided natural light to the reading room and mezzanine shelving area.

c. Plumbing: Some non-functioning plumbing fixtures remain in the basement. A “bubbler” (a regional term for water fountain) has been removed from the reading room wall near the bathroom. The rest of the plumbing fixtures on the first floor – including those in the bathroom and small sink in the work space – appear to date to the mid-twentieth century.

d. Dumbwaiter – There is a small book dumbwaiter between first floor and mezzanine at the work area on the north end of the room. It is a simple mechanical device that operates with a pull chain. It was probably added in the twentieth century.

#### D. Site:

1. Historic landscape design: The library sits at the crest of the hill between the Main Building and where the land slopes down to Ward Memorial Hall. The library is grouped with the recreational hall and the main headquarters building. It set in a grassy area with concrete paths on three sides. Historic photographs indicate that the road in front of the building was previously more curving and pedestrian oriented. There are recessed window wells at the basement level on the east and west sides.

### PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

#### A. Architectural drawings:

Design drawings for the Wadsworth Library have not been located. The oldest available extant set of drawings date to 1935. They are available in the Zablocki VA Medical Center Library and include the south elevation and a cross section.

#### B. Early Views:

A souvenir booklet in the collection of the Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center Library provides the two earliest photographs of the library – one interior and one exterior. See A. Witteman, *National Soldiers' Home near Milwaukee*. New York: The Albertype Co., 1894.

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#### PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of the Wadsworth Library (Building No. 3) at the Northwestern Branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (now Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center) was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS, Catherine Lavoie, Chief) during the summer of 2008. HABS is part of the Heritage Documentation Programs (Richard O'Connor, Chief) of the National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior. The project is sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Construction and Facilities Management, Kathleen Schamel, Federal Preservation Officer, as part of a multi-year effort to record the significant examples of National Soldiers Home architectural currently under the jurisdiction of that agency. It was made possible through the cooperation Robert H. Beller, Director, Zablocki VA Medical Center and many members of his staff, especially Librarian Jill Zahn. The drawings team was led by HABS architect Mark Schara, working with HABS architects Paul Davidson, Anne Kidd, and Jason McNatt, and student architects Daniel DeSousa and Alex Matsov. The historical reports were prepared by HABS Historian Lisa P. Davidson. Large-format photography was undertaken by HABS Photographer James Rosenthal.



READING ROOM.

Figure 1 – Reading Room/Library in Main Building, 1889.  
Source: Zablocki VA Medical Center Library



Figure 2 – Reading Room in Library, 1894  
Source: Zablocki VA Medical Center Library



Figure 3 – Reading Room After Renovation, October 1949  
Source: Zablocki VA Medical Center Library